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ABSTRACT

Boys and girls in the early years of adolescence can best learn ESL communicative skills if the instructor has an understanding of the main characteristics of early adolescence and an appreciation of the teaching techniques best adapted to them. Characteristics which should be taken into account when designing an ESL course include the following: (1) extreme swings of mood, emotional unbalance, and quickness to take offense when none is intended; (2) painful shyness and self-consciousness; (3) a need to conform and be accepted by the group; (4) the striving for independence; and (5) the search for identity. Many of these characteristics are especially pronounced in students in ESL classes, who have been uprooted from their own cultures. Among the instructional techniques which can be readily adapted to such students are human dynamics exercises, small group activities, individual projects, a multi-talent approach, a multi-media program of individualized instruction, and the supportive environment of the humanistic classroom. Suitable teaching aids for an ESL classroom include student-made materials (games, slide-tapes, skits), teacher-made materials, magazines, games, and pop music, the international language of adolescence. (Author/AMH)

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APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY IN THE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL: TEACHING ESL COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS TO 12 to 14 year olds

Address given at IATEFL, London, April 1978.

Diana E. Adams-Smith

I am speaking to the topic "Applied Psychology in the Junior High School: teaching ESL communicative skills to 12-14 year olds." I should like to begin by doing what is known in American educational circles as defining the fuzzy. In this case, defining the fuzzy means looking at boys and girls in the early years of adolescence, in the 8th and 9th grade in American schools, and ascertaining what common characteristics they possess that should be taken into account when designing an ESL course that will best meet their needs. Then I suggest a number of techniques which might be adopted to create a classroom atmosphere conducive to learning, and finally describe examples of materials which could be used in such a setting.

Since I have four teenagers of my own, the characteristics of this age are no mystery to me. However, to make quite sure that my offspring are not completely atypical, I have checked to see what the psychologists say about them. Let me summarise very briefly the somewhat unhappy picture that they present.

Adolescence is a phase of turmoil and transition, producing behaviour that would be considered unusual or bizarre at any other period. Among its characteristics are preoccupation with the self, with phantasy, with the need for self-expression, with philosophical abstractions, theories and ideas. Adolescent behaviour is typified by heightened sensitivity and mood swings. Emotional responses are often intense and out of control. Responses shift rapidly from one extreme to the other - from joy, pride and hope to despair and gloom.

The teenager is often plagued by fears and worries. These occur in such situations as meeting people, being alone, being in a crowd, reciting in class, making a speech, or dealing with members of the other sex. Excessive self-consciousness makes the teenager easily embarrassed with shyness reaching a peak around the age of 15. It is often prolonged and intensified if the individual is forced into situations in which he has to display a weakness. Teenagers worry about prejudices, and about conforming to cultural patterns.

Conformity and the need to belong to a group are two of the major issues at this age. The adolescent conforms not only to group dress and group behaviour but also to group opinion. The desire to receive the approval of the group is very strong, and stems in part from lack of self-confidence.

Much has been written about the peer group and the clique, two important elements in the teenage "crowd". Girls' cliques are more resistant to change and more closely knit than boys' groups, which makes it difficult for a new girl coming into the school or neighborhood to gain acceptance.

Adolescence may also be seen in terms of a striving for autonomy and a search for identity. This latter process is slowed down by the added stresses brought about by accelerated social change. Moving, geographical isolation from members of the extended family, loss of the close-knit, homogeneous community: all these are factors which create additional problems in the process of identity formation

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Many of these tendencies are apparent to an especially marked degree in a group who are learning English as a second language. By definition, they are strangers in a strange land, speakers of a strange language. Some of the teenagers in the class I was associated with in South Carolina were from Germany, most of them from broken homes. Their German mothers had been divorced and subsequently married American servicemen, who had now returned to the United States. There were twins from a Cambodian diplomatic family, forced to leave the country for political reasons. Since arriving in the United States they had been abandoned by their father, the only wage-earner in a family of seven. A number of others were Vietnamese refugees, some of them recently orphaned. You may object that these situations are surely not typical, but my experience supports the opinion that the same problems - though generally to a less severe degree - face all adolescents who have to cope with a permanent move to a new country where they are not familiar with the language used in school.

These characteristics having been identified, the question remains: how best can the teacher compensate for them or even capitalize on them? Is there any way they can be used to advantage, instead of presenting an impossible stumbling block?

Many of the teaching philosophies and techniques developed in the last few years have come into vogue largely because they do take these factors into account - and consequently they work. If they are not effective in all circumstances and at all times, it is because there is no such thing as adolescence in the abstract; there are only millions of adolescents, no two the same. Moreover, such is the inconsistency of teenage behaviour from day to day, even from hour to hour, that what worked with Maria this morning may reduce her to tears this afternoon.

With this caveat in mind, I should like to consider briefly a few possible instructional approaches, relating them to the adolescent characteristics which have just been outlined. The first to come to mind is the humanistic classroom, for which there must be at least fifty different definitions. Essentially, it is a classroom that students enjoy coming to; it is the high point of their day at school. The central concern in a humanistic classroom is what and how the student learns, rather than what and how the instructor teaches. In the ESL situation, real communication is encouraged, usually through small-group activities.

It seems that there are two ways of looking at communication. First, we communicate much more readily about things that interest us. You will remember how this point was made by Sylvia Ashton Warner in her book Spinster, when she described her struggles to teach young Maori children to read. Finally she threw away Janet and John and Dick and Jane and asked each child to tell her a sentence that he wanted to read. The children, who had previously appeared to be ineducable, rapidly created their own individual books which they read avidly. This experience has obvious implications for all kinds of student-created materials, a point to which I shall return later.

Secondly: we communicate much more readily with people we like, in situations where we don't feel threatened. This statement is supported by an analysis of teenagers' speech patterns, which revealed relatively few objective statements of fact compared with a vast majority of subjective utterances relating to opinions and feelings. In other words, Maria is less likely to say to Hans, "The car is driving over the bridge," than she is to say "That's a neat shirt you're wearing."

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But she will not bother to compliment Hans on his taste in shirts unless she already knows and likes him. So it follows that the first tasks for the teacher are to establish a supportive accepting atmosphere and to build the students into a cohesive group.

These same emphases are apparent in several books relating to the values clarification theory developed by Raths, Simon, Kirchenbaum and others. Some of their publications are listed in the bibliography. Language teachers concerned with the need for a greater emphasis on the affective in the classroom have used this values clarification theory as a basis for the development of human dynamics exercises and strategies. Their stated aims include the development of trust and acceptance within the group, self-awareness and self-discovery.

Some of the most interesting materials based on human dynamics are those produced by Stefano Morel of the National Humanistic Education Centre in New York State, and Virginia Wilson and Beverly Wattenmaker from Ohio. Since these materials were originally directed to the teacher of French, Spanish or German, they are less widely known than they should be; however, adaptation to the TESL situation presents no difficulties. Some of you may have heard Wilson and Wattenmaker in Mexico last week. Boundary breaking, rank order exercises and the continuum are a few examples of their ideas.

1. Boundary Breaking (or Incomplete Sentences)

This is a good way to spend five minutes establishing a group atmosphere at the beginning of a lesson. An incomplete sentence is completed in turn by each member of the group, including the teacher. Obviously, the teacher selects sentences of suitable grammatical complexity, using vocabulary items with which the students are familiar. A second use can be the drilling of grammatical structures; e.g. (for the conditional):

If I were the teacher ...
If my parents were rich ...
If I could fly ...
If the school caught on fire ...

A plus for this exercise is that the class are usually so caught up in what they are trying to communicate that imitation of the necessary grammatical pattern comes about unconsciously. Alternatively, the teacher can choose examples that emphasise recently learned vocabulary:

e.g. When I go shopping ...
In my pocket I have ...
At the beach we ...

In this activity it is important for the teacher to remain sensitive to the feelings of the group and avoid examples that may be personal or threatening. For example, I doubt if it would make this group today more cohesive or supportive if you each had to complete such sentences as:

I dislike the person sitting beside me because ...
Jews and Maoists ...
My worst fault is ...

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2. Rank Order Exercises

The same caution applies to these. They are a good way to teach more/most, better/best. Examples are:

Where are you most content? At home, at school, or on the street
Which season do you like best? Spring, summer, autumn or winter?
Which musical group do you prefer? Pink Floyd, Chicago or the Wombles?

Each person gives a complete answer and lists the possibilities in order of preference. If the exercise leads to discussion, so much the better.

3. The Continuum

The continuum exercise requires no speaking, only comprehension and space to move about. The pupils indicate their feelings by taking up a position along an imaginary line in the classroom, over an issue such as:

I prefer being alone/I prefer being with people
I prefer McDonalds hamburgers/I prefer eating in a French restaurant
I prefer the sea/I prefer the mountains

An invaluable source of ideas for group activities is Values Clarification: a Handbook of Practical Strategies, by Simon, Howe and Kirchenbaum. A number of other activities are briefly described on the hand-out sheet Games ESL Students Play.

Obviously, human dynamics is a subject that we could talk about all day, but I should like to turn now to another approach to language learning with just as many devotees: individualised instruction. Sometimes this is taken to mean the use of individual programmed materials, with each member of the class working alone and self-paced. It may involve contracts between teacher and pupil, or packets of materials (sometimes called unipacks) designed to help a pupil through a unit of work with little or no help from the teacher. Whatever its form, individualisedinstruction recognises, to use the words of Frank Grittner, that students "learn in many ways, and there is no one best methodology that will fit all personality types."

The best individualised programmes are those that provide several options for the learner, so that he has to make choices as to pace of progress, preferred type of activities, areas of interest and mode of learning. This need to decide for oneself encourages independence and the assumption of responsibility for learning. However, before any teacher launches out wholeheartedly into such a programme, he needs to examine his own objectives. There is a real danger of setting up an individualised system that places students in isolation from one another and from teachers, a programme lacking in the interpersonal communication essential for language learning, especially at the gregarious age of early adolescence.

But there do remain certain aspects of individualization that can be successfully adapted even to 12-14 year olds. One way of getting at these is through the Student Objectives Paper. If this is filled in by each member of the class at the beginning of the course, it gives the teacher some invaluable information about the attitudes, expectations and interests of each student. But a word of warning:

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if a teacher asks for such statements, it behooves him - at least to some extent - to implement the requests set down. If he is unwilling or unable to introduce this kind of flexibility into his teaching, it is wiser for him not to solicit student opinion at all. Otherwise he will disillusion his pupils after raising their hopes, and kill their interest in the first week. On the other hand, if it is at all possible to take note of expressed preferences and interests, the class will respond positively to the knowledge that they have actively shared in the planning of the course.

The third educational approach that I want to mention is one that to date is hardly known outside the realm of gifted education, although it has clear implications for all teaching. I am referring here to the multi-talent classroom, advocated by Calvin Taylor, the grand old man of education for the talented and gifted in the United States. He believes, first, that every student has some kind of talent. The gift may be adademic, creative or kinesthetic or it may be a special talent for decision-making, for forecasting, or for leadership. It follows that the classroom must be structured in such a way that every student - and not only the academically gifted - has an opportunity to become aware of and to use his own special talent. Traditional classrooms are geared only to the academically gifted, with the result that many of the others - especially the highly creative - soon become frustrated and learn to undervalue their abilities. But if the teacher plans his classroom activities with imagination, there is no youngster who cannot be a winner for a day now and then; it only requires ingenuity in planning to accommodate a multiplicity of talents. It may be nothing more than calling the numbers in the Bingo game, making models of World War II fighter planes, providing a guitar accompaniment to a song - but a teenager who has met with success in some such aspect of the class will try harder at the routine things. Everyone has an Achilles heel - some situation that brings out the loser in us - whether it is changing a typewriter ribbon, milking a cow, or trying to buy toilet paper in Greece - but most of us here are fortunate enough to have forgotten how frustrating it is to be put into an environment where for hours on end we can't do anything we're good at. This is exactly what is happening to many children in school who never have an opportunity even to become aware of their potential strengths.

Together with a multi-talent emphasis, it is valuable to utilize a multi-media approach. Teenagers today, products of the TV age, the post-McLuhan era, are no longer oriented solely to the message of the printed word, as their parents were. We know from the use of individualised instruction that some students learn far more effectively with audiovisual materials than from a textbook. A reading passage supplemented by taped material, visuals and written practice requires the student to use his eyes, ears, voice and hands, and maybe - maybe - even his brain. Before such a battery every student is exposed at some point to the mode of learning that suits him best, and a lesson made up of such a variety of materials can never be boring

I should like to conclude this discussion of classroom methodologies by relating them more directly to the adolescent characteristics that we have already considered.

Youngsters undergoing mood swings usually appreciate the variety of pace and materials and the optional modes of learning available in an individualized programme, where a wide selection of media is used. A multi-talent approach helps the ugly duckling teen-ager in search of an identity to appreciate that she has

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at least some swanlike qualities. Work on individual projects meets the need for independence, while small group activities develop social skills and help the newcomer to find a niche. Human dynamics exercises based on values clarification theory can also help in the search for self-understanding, and the shy self-conscious ones will feel less ill-at-ease in the supportive atmosphere of the humanistic classroom.

Finally, I should like to show you a few examples of materials that I have found useful. I have already mentioned Sylvia Ashton-Warner's discovery of the importance of student-made materials. These cannot be over-emphasized; teenagers love making things, especially if they are for the use of the whole group. One example is this student-designed board for 4-6 players, DOPO. In order for the player to move round the trail with his coloured counter he has to pick up a card before each move and answer the question under the guidance of a student umpire who has the answer key. Also popular are student-made crosswords and tic-tac-toe (noughts and crosses). However, many youngsters are capable of much more complicated productions. Some of the best projects I have supervised in junior high school were slide-tape shows: a series of slides, photographed with a school camera by the students, with an accompanying taped commentary. Usually these were made by groups of two or three, who learned to handle cameras, tape recorders, and on occasion videocameras and cinecameras, with efficiency and expertise. As the photography was done outside school hours, the projects did not take up as much class time as you might expect. Neither were they expensive, as we used film which was bulk-bought by the school for use in several different projects; the slides were developed and mounted by members of the school camera club, and we used reel-to-reel tapes discarded by the language lab

Just as teenagers like making things, so even the shyest ones enjoy play-acting. We had a regular slot for skits which they wrote, based on the material of each unit. They particularly enjoyed acting out classroom situations, portraying the foibles of the teacher with appalling frankness. Successes that spring to mind were Red Riding Hood and At the Airport, which turned out to be a hijacking drama.

When the printed or spoken word begins to pall, magazines are a useful resource. With the cooperation of friends and parents, we always had a pile for the class to search through looking for illustrations for some relevant topic. These would end up on the wall, either as a collage or accompanying a caption. Alternatively the teacher can write captions on the board and leave the students to find suitable illustrations. Yet another engrossing occupation is matching up cartoons and captions.

One useful teacher-made device is a Jeopardy board. The class divides into teams, each with a whistle, and a timekeeper and score-keeper are chosen. Inside each envelope is a card with a question relating to the category at the top. These may be earnest (give the plural of child) or frivolous (where would you find an antelope, a canteloupe and a skipping rope?). If the question is answered correctly, the amount on the outside of the envelope is added to the team's score, but if the answer is incorrect, the amount is deducted. After the question has been read, the team whose leader whistles first has the privilege of answering. A Mars Bar or an evening without homework makes a suitable prize. The Jeopardy board can be used to revise materials before a test; it is definitely the most exciting way I know to review verbs and plurals.

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Finally, one further aspect of adolescent culture of which many adults are totally ignorant is its music. We are aware that there is a lot of noise on the radio that we prefer not to listen to, and that teenagers persistently play cacophonous records at ear-splitting levels. That, in many cases, is as far as we go. As Alexander the Great reportedly said of Persian music, it resembles the howling of scalded cats. But pop music is the one aspect of adolescent culture that is truly universal, ignoring barriers of race and language. Even in the Middle East, Arab teenagers with virtually no English can be heard singing the lyrics of the latest American pop hit. It is sometimes contended that the vocabulary and structures of popular songs are too complex to allow for their classroom use, but I do not believe that this is generally true. It is certainly the kind of communication that these youngsters respond to, and if a few expressions are obscure you can always study them as examples of vocabulary in context. The texts of this song and the next are from albums that my teenage daughters are currently crazy about, and, they report, so are their classmates, whose nationalities include Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Yugoslav, Norwegian, Lebanese, Syrian, Jordanian, German, English and Australian.

Another Rainy Day in New York City is a good passage for an examination of adjectives and adverbs. Grammatically it couldn't be simpler.

In Time you might look at the use of present participles and comparative forms. The texts of these are available together with one or two more from Carly Simon and Pink Floyd with suggestions for classroom use.

So, to sum up. I have tried to link three elements: the salient characteristics of early adolescence, some techniques in instructional methodology, and examples of suitable materials. Keeping all these considerations in mind, I believe that it is possible to create an ESL classroom situation in which students whose uprooted lives so far have left them unsure of themselves and hesitant to make friends can be made to feel that at last they have found a place where their breadth of travel and experience is an advantage rather than a disaster.

STUDENT OBJECTIVES PAPER

Write down what you plan to get out of the course this year. What would you like to learn, how would you like to learn it, and what activities do you think would make the course more interesting and enjoyable? You can check some of the objectives below if you are in agreement with them, but your own objectives may be quite different. If so, write them at the bottom in the space provided.

- to order a McDonalds Hamburger. ____
- to ask directions so that you can find your way round the school. ____
- to carry on a telephone conversation with an English speaker. ____
- to talk to classmates. ____
- to write a letter to a friend. ____
- to compose a poem in English. ____
- to write and act a short play in English. ____
- to make a program on videotape/slide-tape. ____
- to cook a typical American meal. ____
- to understand the rules of baseball/football. ____
- to get a C/B/A for the course. ____
- to find out how Americans live. ____
- to take a fifty minute nap every day. ____
- to get to know other students in the class. ____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

B

STUDENT ASSESSMENT SHEET (S.A.S.)

Before you begin answering the questions below, you may like to read over the S.O.P. you filled out at the beginning of the year.

A. Answer on a scale 1-5 (1 = highest, 5 = lowest).

1. Did you find the activities in the course interesting? _____
2. Did the methods and materials used to present the program suit the way you prefer to learn? _____
3. Was there sufficient variety? _____
4. Did the activities help you meet your objectives? _____

B.

1. What aspects of the course (programmed material, textbook, tapes, journal, film-strips, games, group activities, other) did you like most?

   _____

   And least? _____

2. How would you change the course to improve it? _____

   _____

3. Was there enough opportunity for students to become actively involved? _____

   _____

4. Did you understand what was expected of you? _____
5. Did you have enough assistance from the teacher? _____
6. Have you became more responsible and self-directed? _____
7. How did you like working in groups? _____

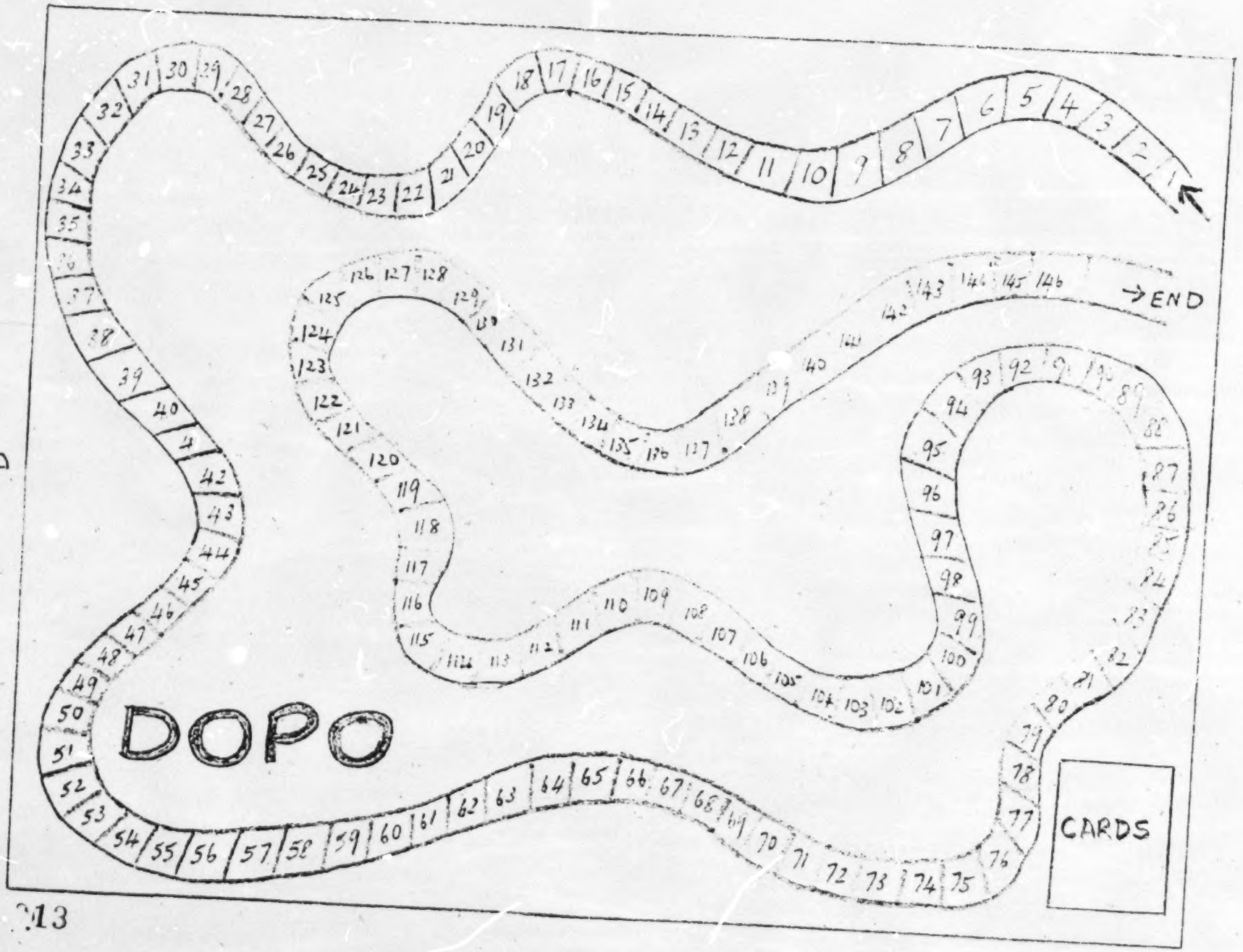
   individually? _____

   with the whole class? _____
8. What to you was the most important thing you learned this year? _____

   _____

JEOPARDY

Plurals	Verbs	Colours	Adjectives	Where?
$10	$10	$10	$10	$10
$20	$20	$20	$20	$20
$30	$30	$30	$30	$30
$40	$40	$40	$40	$40


DOPO
CARDS
END

The
OPPOSITE of
BIG is
_____
(2 spaces) 21

One child,
four
_____.
(3 spaces) 12

DOPO CARDS

PAST TENSE.
Now I see,
yesterday I _____.
(1 space) 36

A large
animal
with four legs,
a tail
and a trunk.
(2 spaces) 7

F

TIC-TAC-TOE

TO CLAIM A SQUARE, GIVE THE RELATED ADJECTIVE (CORRECTLY SPELLED). THIS GAME MAY BE PLAYED BY TWO STUDENTS OR BY TWO TEAMS IN CLASS.

FRIEND _____	LENGTH _____	THIRST _____
SUN _____	CHILD _____	NATURE _____
WIDTH _____	DAY _____	HUNGER _____

THE WINNER IS THE FIRST TO CLAIM THREE SQUARES IN A ROW (ACROSS, DOWN OR DIAGONAL).

G

Another Rainy Day in New York City (Chicago X)

Another rainy day in New York City,
Softly sweet, so silently it falls,
As crosstown traffic crawls.

Memories in my way in New York City,
Tender, tough, too tragic to be true,
And nothing I can do.

City workers cheer,
The taxis disappear;
Another rainy day in New York City.

Another spacey stay in New York City.
High up in an overpriced hotel,
The view is really swell.

Windy, wet and gray in New York City.
No one here I really want to see,
Friend of the family.

Suddenly serene,
Air is fresh and clean.
Another rainy day in New York City.

Classroom emphases: adjectives, adverbs.

Time (Pink Floyd)

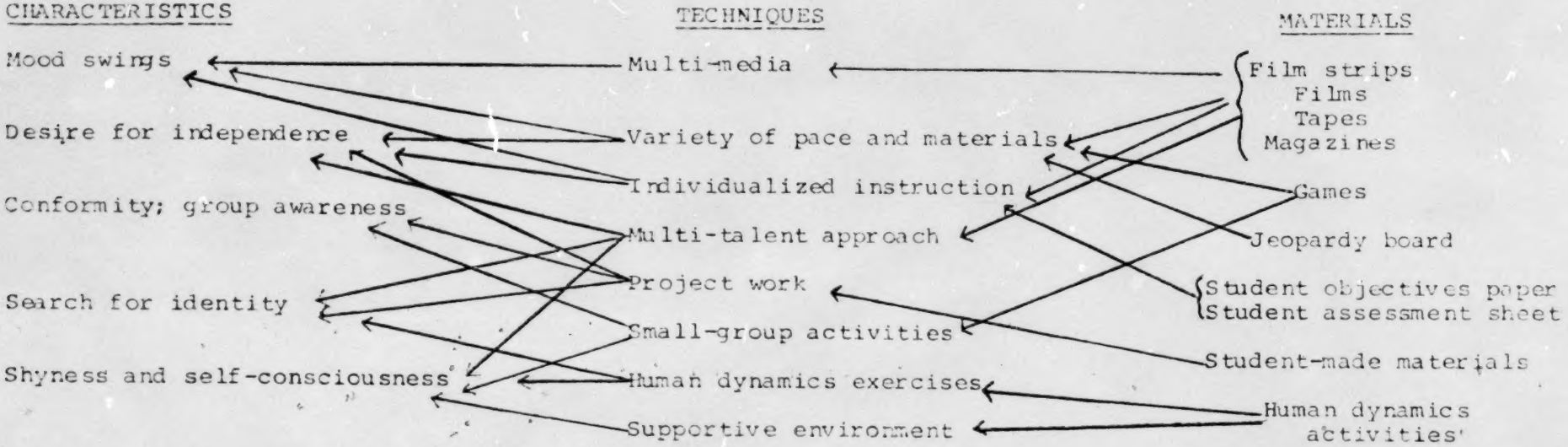
Ticking away the moments that make up a dull day,
You fritter and waste the hours in an offhand way,
Kicking around on a piece of ground in your home town,
Waiting for someone or something to show you the way.

Tired of lying in the sunshine, staying home to watch the rain,
You are young and life is long and there is time to kill today.
And then one day you find that years have got behind you.
No one told you when to run; you missed the starting gun.

And you run and you run to catch up with the sun, but it's shining
And racing around to come up behind you again.
The sun is the same in the relative way, but you're older,
Shorter of breath and closer to death.

Every year is getting shorter, never seem to find the time.
Plans that either come to naught or half a page of scribbled lines.
Hanging on in quiet desperation is the English way.
The time is gone, the song is over; thought I'd something more to say.

Classroom emphases: present participles, comparatives.


CHARACTERISTICS
TECHNIQUES
MATERIALS
Mood swings
Desire for independence
Conformity; group awareness
Search for identity
Shyness and self-consciousness
Multi-media
Variety of pace and materials
Individualized instruction
Multi-talent approach
Project work
Small-group activities
Human dynamics exercises
Supportive environment
Film strips
Films
Tapes
Magazines
Games
Jeopardy board
Student objectives paper
Student assessment sheet
Student-made materials
Human dynamics activities